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ABSTRACT

A study examined the patterns of error in the preterite and imperfect tenses in the written Spanish of native English-speaking college students. Errors found in the midterm examination were analyzed to determine whether they were due to incorrect tense, incorrect form of the tense, or both. It was predicted that many students would choose incorrect form or tense, and many more would choose both. Results revealed that very few answered with both incorrect tense and incorrect form, suggesting that the choice of verb tense and knowledge of correct form are largely independent of each other. In addition, interlingual errors (choice of tense) were slightly more common than intralingual errors (choice of verb form), supporting some earlier research results. (MSE)

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SYNTACTIC AND MORPHOLOGICAL ERRORS OF ENGLISH SPEAKERS ON THE SPANISH PAST TENSES

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SYNTACTIC AND MORPHOLOGICAL ERRORS OF ENGLISH SPEAKERS ON THE SPANISH PAST TENSES

Introduction

The coalesced category represented by the English past tense is split in Spanish. Choice of aspect, an element which is expressed in English through the choice of simple versus progressive tenses (completed <> not completed) is more often realized in Spanish by means of the imperfect/preterite distinction. Detailed contrastive analyses of the Spanish preterite/imperfect versus the English past may be found in Bull (1965) and Stockwell et al. (1965). The extensive coverage of the topic provided by these authorities corraborates what every teacher of Spanish to English speakers knows from experience--the contrast between the languages' treatment of past events, conditions, etc., is a major source of difficulty to learners. However, as will be seen later, contrastive analysis does not always succeed in predicting the difficulties faced by learners.

This study attempts to investigate patterns of errors in the preterite and imperfect in the written Spanish of students of Spanish II at the University of Pittsburgh. It does so through an empirical investigation of the kinds of errors these students made on their Midterm exam. (The exam was held in 1983--this report could not be released up to now for reasons of exam security)

It is probable that different instructors explain the Spanish tense system in different ways, but the basic explanation put forward in the text used at Pitt was likely to be the common foundation upon which the subjects of this study depended for guidance in this area. So I consider it useful to cite the exposition of the preterite/imperfect with which nearly every student of Spanish II included in this study might be expected to be familiar:

> Essentially, the preterit views past events etc., as noncontinuous, and the imperfect views them as continuous. That is, the preterit is used to report events, situations etc., which begin or end--or both--at some time in the past which the speaker has in mind. The imperfect, on the other hand, is used to report events, situations etc., which neither begin nor end at the time the speaker is thinking of, but rather which have already begun and are in progress or existence at this time... Spanish consistently distinguishes between events in progress and events that begin and/or terminate, by choosing the imperfect for the former and the preterit for the latter. English may or may not explicitly make the same distinction by choosing particular verb forms. For example, the expressions 'used to' and 'was ---ing' clearly indicate habitual or ongoing events. However, in all other cases where Spanish has an imperfect, English has a simple past tense form ('had', 'was', 'knew', etc.) just as in all the cases where Spanish has the preterit... Another striking difference between English and Spanish is that English sometimes uses completely different verbs to express distinctions that are made in Spanish by choosing the imperfect or the preterit. For example, the preterit of conocer is equivalent to 'meet', that is, 'begin an acquaintance', while the imperfect of conocer is 'know', 'be acquainted with'. Another common verb that has different English equivalents in the preterit and the imperfect is saber. In the imperfect, saber is 'know', 'have factual information', while in the preterit it is 'learn', 'hear', 'acquire information'. (Segreda & Harris, 1976, 105-106)

Thus, it can be seen that students of Spanish must learn to specify the context of past actions much more explicitly than is their custom in English. Generally, as Stockwell and Bowen (1965, p. 284) put it, the preterite/imperfect demands an obligatory choice in Spanish, where there is often no choice in English. Indeed, it is for this reason that Stockwell and Bowen place this grammatical problem among those on the highest level of their hierarchy of difficulty for English speakers learning Spanish.

Empirical evidence of the difficulty of the choice for English speakers is provided by Tran-Thi-Chau (1975). Restricting herself, to a large extent, to Stockwell and Bowen's work, she sought to determine the comparative difficulty of 33 different Spanish grammatical categories for English speakers. Her findings, based upon the responses of 149 high-school students in Toronto, enabled her to set up a hierarchy of difficulty of these 33 items. Choice of imperfect/preterite was the second most difficult of the 33, with an incorrect response rate of 77%. She also assessed student perceptions of the difficulty of the 33 items, and found that choice of imperfect/ preterite was considered the fourth most difficult category by her subjects. In addition to the choice of imperfect/ preterite, three other categories employed by Tran are relevant to the present study. These are Regular Preterites, Irregular Preterites, and Regular Imperfects. (It seems probable that she does not list irregular imperfects because there are so few of them--only three--in Spanish. She does not explain her reason

for this omission.) It appears that under these categories she listed errors made in the form of the verb. An analysis of students' errors and of their perceptions of relative difficulty revealed the following:

	% Wrong	O.D.	S.P.D.
Irreg. Preterites	44	23	17
Regul. Preterites	16	6	10
Regul. Imperfects	53	26	21
Choice of Tenses	77	32	30

O.D.= Order of difficulty of these items, based upon an error-analysis of all 33 categories.

S.P.D.= Student Perception of difficulty of these items, in regard to students' opinions of the comparative difficulty of all 33 categories.

Both O.D. and S.P.D. figures represent positions on a scale from 1 to 33, from least difficult to most difficult. Thus, for instance, regular preterite forms were the sixth least common source of errors, while choice of imperfect/preterite was the second most common.

Tran's research did not specifically isolate the imperfect/preterite as an object of study, and, as may already have been noticed, the reader of her work must make guesses as to what her figures actually represent. Moreover, the figure she cites for regular imperfects (53% of her sample were wrong on this category) seems extraordinarily high. But it will be worthwhile to bear Tran's findings in mind in connection with the study now to be described.

Spanish II Midterm at Pitt

The students whose performance is studied here were students of Spanish 2 at the University of Pittsburgh. These students were half-way through their second semester of Spanish at Pitt. They had only begun their study of the preterite/imperfect distinction in the weeks immediately prior to the examination. At the time of this study, the Spanish II midterm examination at the University of Pittsburgh consisted of nine sections. The exam was not strictly timed, and all students had the opportunity to finish. One section on the examination explicitly tested command of the preterite and imperfect tenses. This section was composed of a prose passage in which the verbs were listed in their infinitive form. The student's only task was to write in the correct form of the verb, obeying the specific instruction that either the preterite or imperfect be used. A copy of this section may be found at the end of this report. 85 students took the examination.

There are 17 verbs to be conjugated in this passage. Of these, nine need to be rendered in Spanish in the preterite while seven must be in the imperfect. One verb, poder, was judged to be contextually appropriate in either tense. While there is a difference in meaning carried by the choice of tense for poder here, native speakers deemed either preterite or imperfect acceptable in the context. Four verbs, levantarse, vestirse, sentarse, and ponerse, require a reflexive pronoun in Spanish. For the purposes of this investigation, control of the reflexive was considered irrelevant to the central question at issue.

Analysis of Errors

The total number of errors (T) was analyzed as follows:

F: Correct tense chosen, but written with an error in Form

N: Incorrect Tense chosen, but correct in form of that tense

U: Blank entries, or forms which could not be assigned to any other category

B: Entries for which it was clear that the subject had chosen both the wrong tense (imperfect/preterite) and the wrong form of that tense.

The following tables provide a break-down of student responses:

Table 1

Total No. of Entries	= 1445	(17 x 85)
Total No. of Tense Choices	= 1360	(16 x 85)
Total of optional choices	= 85	(1 x 85)
Total requiring preterite	= 765	(9 x 85)
Total requiring imperfect	= 595	(7 x 85)

Total Errors on Entries requiring Preterite	= 284	(37%)
Total Errors on Entries requiring Imperfect	= 147	(24%)
Total Errors	= 431	(31%)

Table 2

Errors:

	Preterite Needed		Imperfect Needed		Total	
T:	284		147		431	
F:	134	(47%)	12	(8%)	146	(34%)
N:	90	(32%)	84	(57%)	174	(40%)
U:	51	(18%)	38	(26%)	89	(21%)
B:	9	(3%)	13	(9%)	22	(5%)

When a particular entry is listed under U above, it is an admission that the investigator was unable to judge what the student was trying to do. So entries assigned to category U comprised a variety of types. Apart from spaces left blank, the most common entries to be listed as U were forms of utterly inappropriate tenses, e.g. present indicative or subjunctive. In these cases, it was impossible to decide what the student was attempting in relation to the task he had been set. When an entry is listed as F above, a judgement had been made that the student was aware of which tense he had to use, but did not know the exact form of the verb in this case. When an entry is listed under B above, it has been judged to be an attempt at the inappropriate tense of the two, which was also wrong in the form of the verb in that inappropriate tense. When an entry is listed under N above, it is clearly the correct form of the verb, in an inappropriate tense.

It might be suspected that a taxonomy such as this is very inaccurate, since the only evidence we have for what the student was trying to do is the word he wrote down on the examination paper. Since the tense is only recognizable morphologically, how can we assign an entry to a tense when it is morphologically incorrect? In other words, the only way we know that a student chose the correct tense is if he gave the correct form; an incorrect form cannot be assigned with total confidence to any tense.

While this anomaly was taken into account, the conduct of the investigation showed that it did not pose any great problem. Morphologically, Spanish preterite and imperfect verb-endings are quite dissimilar, and this distinction is reinforced by the fact that irregular verbs tend to undergo stem changes in the preterite. Thus, the first criterion for assigning an entry to a particular tense was the inflection which the student had performed on it to mark the tense. These inflections are o, io for preterite, and aba, ia for imperfect. The second criterion was the stem irregularities of the preterite forms of many verbs in the passage. Where these criteria conflicted--e.g. where there was a verb-ending in the preterite added to a verb-stem in the imperfect--the ending was taken as the paramount guide in judging which tense was being attempted.

In practice, the investigator, who is an experienced teacher of Spanish, felt that incorrect forms could be assigned to a particular tense with a high degree of confidence. The task was really no more difficult that determining whether, say, *drived should be taken as an attempt to form the present or the past in English. Intuitively, the fact that this form follows the regular past paradigm outweighs the fact that its stem is the stem for the present; most decisions in the present study were at least as clear as this one.

General Findings

Of the grand total of verb entries with obligatory choice (1360) only 431 were incorrect. In other words, most entries were correct in both choice and form. Next most common were the entries which were wrong in only one respect--either tense or form. Of the 431, 320 were wrong in only one respect. Only 22 entries were wrong in both choice of tense and form. This is a rather surprising figure. Before the data were analyzed, it was expected that lots of students would be wrong in choice of tense, lots of students would write the wrong form of the verb, and lots more would do both. The results show that only the first two of these hypotheses were borne out; 40% chose the wrong tense, 34% the wrong form, but only 5% did both. This low value of B leads to the tentative conclusion that what we are dealing with here are two separate processes; choice of tense for a verb and knowledge of the correct form of that verb in that tense are to a great degree independent of each other.

40% of errors were due to wrong choice of tense, while 34% were due to wrong forms of the right tense. This suggests that choice of tense is marginally more difficult for learners of Spanish preterite/imperfect than are forms of those tenses. The greater difficulty of choice of tense may be underestimated by these data. The passage used in the examination was to some extent seeded with irregular verbs. Thus the value of F may be to some degree higher here than it would be for the language as a whole, thus causing the margin of F over N to be greater than is revealed here.

Individual Verbs

A discussion of the data en masse is of limited utility. We can come to a much better understanding of learner's 'transitional competence' (Richards 1974) if we examine responses for each verb discretely. For this reason, responses for each particular verb were analyzed, and the most interesting findings are given below. Verbs are listed here as regular or irregular; this applies to regularity in the tense required in the context of the passage, not to perfect regularity in all possible tenses of Spanish. It should be remembered that T=85 for all 17 of these verbs.

1. levanto' Regular Preterite

F= 2
N= 7
U= 6
B= 1

There is no striking pattern here. As might be expected, the form of this regular preterite did not cause much difficulty. Four of the unrecognizable entries were in the present tense forms.

2. hacía Regular Imperfect

F= 1
N= 1
U=11
B= 0

The value of U is very high, constituting the highest proportion for U to be found for any verb. Analysis of entries classified under U showed no clear pattern, but most appeared to be composed by analogy with irregular tenses of this verb (e.g. Present Indicative, Future) or by confusion with forms of another verb, haber.

3. estaba — Regular Imperfect

F= 1
N= 3
U= 6
B= 2

As expected, a very low value for F. A rather high proportion of the total errors were of type U, but these did not fall into any pattern. The very low value of F is typical of those found on the imperfects in this study. These cast great doubt on the reliability of Tran's rate of error (53%) for regular imperfects.

4. vistió — Irregular Preterite

F=43
N= 1
U= 4
B= 1

This verb is one of a small group of Spanish verbs whose stem-vowel is raised in the preterite. 30 of the incorrect forms were modelled on the infinitive stem vestir, making its preterite form regular *vestió. Other common errors of form (4 of each) were *vestí and *visto. The former is the correct first person preterite, while the latter seems to stem from a belief that the verb is of the -ar conjugation, for which the preterite ending is -o. Visto is also the perfect participle of another verb ver (to see) and it is conceivable that this also produces interference. In any case, vistió was the verb which occasioned the most incorrect forms, leading to the suggestion that a slight irregularity (i for e) is trickier than a gross irregularity. Noteworthy also for this verb was the very low value for N.

5. fue Irregular Preterite

F= 5 Given that the preterite is totally dissimilar to
N=10 the infinitive ir, the low value for F was rather
U= 6 surprising. Of the five incorrect forms, all took
B= 0 the form of the first person preterite fui. The higher value of N may arise from the fact that the imperfect iba is much more morphologically like the infinitive than is the preterite. Generally, this verb did not stimulate as many wrong entries as could have been expected. This may be ascribed to the fact that it is one of the most frequently- used verbs in the language. Moreover, the preterite of ir is conjugated in precisely the same way as is the preterite of ser (to be). Thus these preterite forms are practised more often than are the preterites of any other verb.

6. había Regular Imperfect

F= 2 This regular form provided most students with few
N= 7 problems. N accounted for half the errors,
U= 2 showing that these 7 students had not mastered
B= 2 even the basic function of imperfect as descriptor of background situations.

7. pudo/podía Irregular Preterite, Regular Imperfect

F=26 Either tense was accepted here, although the students were not told this until after the examination. The great majority of the incorrect forms were the results of students' attempts to use preterite. 5 of these

showed *pudió--the student knew that the verb was of the irregular group whose stem-vowels are raised in the preterite, but he didn't know that poder is doubly irregular in the preterite, since it takes the ending o (unstressed) which is more like the o (stressed) of -ar verbs. There were four first person preterite pude, and four first person preterite of another verb poner. The total number of errors (F=26) represents 31% of the 85 attempts. This is striking in its equivalence to the rate of errors of all types (31%) for the examination as a whole.

8. salió — Regular Preterite

F= 6
N= 6
U= 3
B= 0

Only six entries gave the wrong form of this regular verb. Of these, four used the first person preterite sali.

9. esperaba — Regular Imperfect

F= 1
N=25
U= 5
B= 2

By far the greatest source of error here was choice of tense. The context here clearly demands the imperfect, so it is regrettable that we have no way of ascertaining why 25 students chose the preterite. Possible sources of error include the fact that a literal translation of the Spanish to English would result in a rather strange phrase in English--"he expected it in the box"--and, in addition, that the word buzón was probably unknown to the majority of the students.

10. dejaba — Regular Imperfect

F= 3
N=17
U= 4
B= 1

A similar pattern of errors to the previous verb, though not as striking. Again, it is difficult to see why 17 students chose the preterite. It is unlikely that the high rates of errors in choice of tense for verbs 9 and 10 would have been predicted by a contrastive analysis.

11. sentó — Regular Preterite

F=35
N= 6
U= 5
B= 1

Why did so many students give the wrong form of this regular verb? Analysis of errors shows two main types. 17 students wrote *sientó; they knew that the dipthongization of stressed e is widespread in Spanish, but they overgeneralized this to embrace the unstressed e of the preterite. The majority of the remaining errors revealed confusion with another verb sentir (to feel, regret). This latter verb is of the type whose stem-vowel is raised in the preterite, and many of the incorrect forms entered for sentar showed i for e in the stem.

12. leyó — Regular Preterite

F= 4
N= 3
U= 4
B= 0

As far as the subjects of this study were concerned, this was the easiest verb on the entire examination, total errors = 11. All four incorrect forms exhibited the first person preterite lei.

13. interesaba(n) Regular Imperfect

F= 2 N= 8 U= 5 B= 0

Strictly, this verb should be written in the plural, since the subject of the Spanish sentence is incidentes. However, it was decided to accept both singular and plural as correct, since the students had not yet practised syntactical patterns of this type. Very few of the entries, (correct or incorrect) showed an attempt to use the plural.

14. puso Irregular Preterite

F=16 N= 3 U=11 B= 1

The high proportion of unrecognizable forms was due to apparent confusion with another verb poder. Of the 16 identifiable errors, 7 took the form of first person preterite. The remaining 9 wrong-form entries revealed 7 different kinds of errors.

15. supo Irregular Preterite

F=10 N=40 U= 5 B= 2

The subjects had to make a fairly sophisticated choice here. The context of the passage demanded that the preterite (found out, realized) be employed rather than the imperfect (knew). Nearly half the students made the wrong decision on this. This supports the contrastivists' expectation that the greatest difficulties will arise when what is expressed lexically in one language is expressed syntactically on another. (It would be very interesting to see how great this problem is for Spanish speakers learning English). Of the ten errors in form, six were the result of treating the verb as regular, and thus writing *sabió.

16. llovía — Regular Imperfect

F= 2 N=23 U= 5 B= 5

It is very noticeable that such a high number of students (23+5=28) chose to put this verb in the preterite. This is despite the fact that this is one of the few verbs in the passage for which the English equivalents closely parallel the Spanish. Thus Spanish preterite would be rendered by English 'it rained', while imperfect would be translated as 'it was raining'. A contrastive analysis would be very unlikely to predict that students would choose the preterite to express 'it was raining', yet this is precisely what one-third of the students in this sample did.

17. volvió — Regular Preterite

F=13 N=12 U= 7 B= 3

Of the 13 incorrect forms, the most common error was to overgeneralize dipthongization of stressed o to unstressed o. Thus six students wrote *vuelvió.

Discussion of Errors

The isolation of individual verbs shows that the finding for the totality of the data--that N errors were marginally more common than F errors--masks violent oscillations in particlur cases. Thus for vistió, for example, F=43, N=1, while for supo F=10, N=40. As might have been expected, F-type errors were most numerous on irregular preterites, where the average for F was 12. There were very few errors of form on the imperfect verbs; the

average for each was F=1.7, and in the case of three verbs F=1. Of the three kinds of verb, the value of F for regular preterites seems strangely high. There is, on the surface, no reason why a regular preterite should be so much more difficult than a regular imperfect. But this high value for F was accounted for by examining all the incorrect responses, and it provided one of the most interesting findings of this study. The data show fairly conclusively that it is not so much whether a verb is regular or irregular that counts, but rather whether a student suspects that it may be irregular. This suspicion is based on two factors:

1) The verb is of a stem-changing type. These may be viewed by students as "irregular" e.g. sentar, volver.

2) The verb is confused with other verbs that are irregular, either in the preterite or in other tenses e.g. poder, poner. It should be stressed that this similarity is morphological alone; there was no sign of any lexical or semantic confusion.

Thus, irregularites in the system of the target language have a kind of spillover effect. Awareness that some verbs are irregular causes other verbs to be treated as irregular; just as the regular paradigms are overgeneralized, so also are irregular inflections. Errors of this type must be classified as intralingual, and seemed to result from a strategy of learning.

There were a number of traces of pedagogically induced errors. It was noticed that in many cases the first person preterite was given. This trend could not be discerned in the

case of the imperfect forms, since first and third persons are identical in this tense; indeed this is one of the reasons why the imperfect forms were so much easier than the preterite. There was also a certain amount of interference from the present tense visible. Both these types of errors may result from the way the language is presented to the learner. A large proportion of responses in drills and free conversation in class will be in the first person and/or the present tense. These forms thus have primacy over others.

Conclusion

This study was prompted by the desire to see whether English speakers learning Spanish encountered greater difficulty in choosing the appropriate imperfect/preterite tense or in learning the correct forms of verbs in these tenses. To some extent this distinction obeys the formula interlingual/intralingual. Verbs describing the past in Spanish are more marked--for aspect--than is usually the case in English. Errors in the forms of Spanish verbs are a function of irregularities within Spanish itself. While the study threw up a lot of interesting information *en passant*, no firm answer was obtained to the central question investigated. Tran's research mentioned earlier enabled her to categorize interlingual errors as accounting for 51% of the total, with intralingual errors marking up 29%. The present study, though not exhibiting such a great difference, supported Tran in finding interlingual errors (40%) to be somewhat more common than intralingual errors (34%). Yet this cannot be taken

as a justification of procedures of contrastive analysis, for the study revealed a significant number of cases where rate of error could not have been predicted on the basis of similarity/ dissimilarity to English.

Appendix: Text Used in Examination

SPANISH 2, MIDTERM EXAM

III. Instructions: Write in the appropriate forms of the verbs in parentheses to render the following sentences into a correct paragraph in Spanish. Use the blanks to the right. Use only past tense (preterite and imperfect).

Juan (1-levantarse) a las seis.	1.	se levantó
(2-Hacer) frío y el cielo (3-estar)	2.	Hacía
	3.	estaba
cubierto de nubes. (4-Vestirse) y	4.	Se vistió
(5-ir) a la cocina. Como no	5.	fue
(6-haber) ni pan ni huevos, no	6.	había
(7-poder) preparar el desayuno.	7.	pudo / podía
(8-Salir) a buscar el periódico,	8.	Salió
lo (9-esperar) en el buzón donde	9.	esperaba
siempre lo (10-dejar) el muchacho.	10.	dejaba
(11-Sentarse) y (12-leer) el	11.	Se sentó
periódico desde el principio hasta	12.	leyó
el final, con excepción de la crónica		
social. Nunca le (13-interesar) los	13.	interesaban
incidentes de la vida social. Luego	14.	se puso
(14-ponerse) la chaqueta. (15-Saber)	15.	Supo
que (16-llover) y (17-volver) para	16.	llovía
el paraguas.	17.	volvía

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